

NEW FOR 1858: THE “CALLED” STRIKE!

NEW YORK CITY, March 15 (1858) – The second season of the N.B.B.O. begins in seven weeks, and with it will come a new rule: the Called Strike!

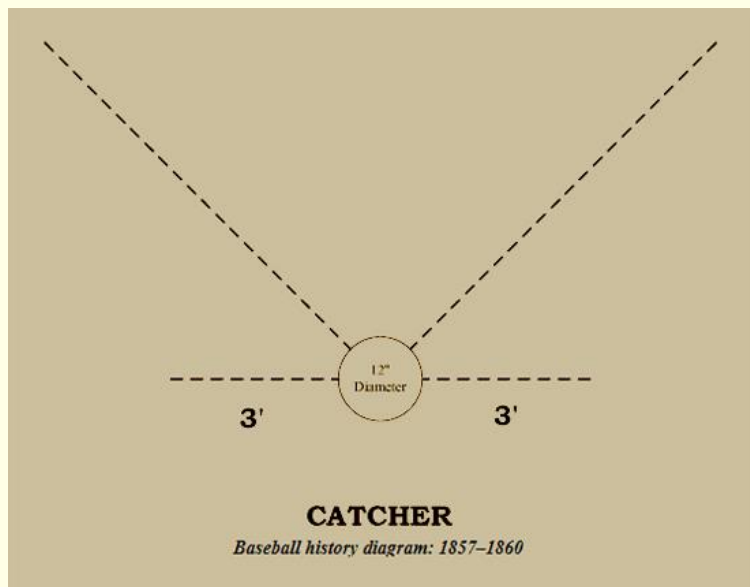
During meetings of the National Base Ball Organization Executive Committee, held over the past few days and led by Knickerbocker B.B.C. president Doc Adams, the only major topic at hand was pace of play. Agreement was nearly unanimous that the choosiest batsmen in the sport were single-handedly causing games to last longer than necessary, because of their dogged insistence that the pitcher should deliver a ball precisely fit to their particular type of swing while also taking into account venue, time of day, wind speed, humidity, and anything else that might affect the flight of the spherical object.

The solution reached by the N.B.B.O.E.C. was a simple one: let the umpire call a strike on the batter if he watches a perfectly hittable pitch sail by. There were discussions on drawing up exact parameters of a “Strike Zone” that could be enforced by all umpires, but this was where unanimous agreement broke down. Instead, a rough framework on the definition of a “hittable pitch” was reached.

Using the player-members of the Executive Committee as proverbial guinea pigs at Gotham’s Red House field, eventual agreement was reached that any pitch crossing an area of the plate within arm & bat reach of the batter is, by definition hittable, and thus called a strike if the batter doesn’t partake. What, exactly, does that mean? Again, no exact parameters were set, but loose definitions were officially put into the rulebook:

- The highest pitch at which a batter can reasonably swing is shoulder height
- The lowest pitch at which a batter can reasonably swing is roughly shin height (one foot above ground)

The inside & outside bounds of what could be considered a hittable pitch were going to be more difficult to identify since there is no set area in which the batter must stand when a pitch is delivered.



All the Executive Committee was able to do with regards to the left & right bounds of the area of what could & should qualify as a Called Strike was state that "Any pitch between the shoulders and the shins that the batter can swing at with a reasonable reach shall be called a strike, via umpire's discretion, if the batter does not swing at it."

Such a definition will leave a lot of leeway to game umpires in deciding what constitutes a strike, but with batters standing on a simple line to take their turn against the pitcher there was no other way to make the new rule without altering the Ground Rules of the sport itself. Still, the Executive Committee, including player-members, were satisfied with the work they had done, and the new "Called Strike" rule will go into effect for the 1858 season.

Will the Called Strike rule cut down the time of games? Absolutely. Will the Called Strike rule result in more arguments between players and adjudicators? Almost certainly. Will the Called Strike rule lead to changes that allow umpires to call balls faster? There was no indication of that at the Executive Committee meetings, but it cannot be long. Will the Called Strike rule lead to more strikeouts? This change was aimed at the most persnickety batsmen and, given how easy it is to make contact with the ball, it is again unlikely the average fan will see their team strike out more than once per game next season.

In any event, called strikes are here and they are here to stay!